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Hemmings, Clare

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Ready for Bologna?

The Impact of the Declaration on Women's and Gender Studies in the UK

Clare Hemmings

LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

ABSTRACT This article explores the likely impact that the Bologna Declaration (1999) will have on the field of women's and gender studies in the UK. While the UK higher education sector as a whole has been slow to take up the opportunities and challenges presented by Bologna, this article argues that women's and gender studies may gain particularly from a European reorientation. Women's and gender studies currently has to struggle for both national resources and recognition, and so has little to lose and much to gain from actively engaging in the process of Europeanization of degrees. The author advocates for UK women's and gender studies practitioners to take a leading role in this process, in order to facilitate the potential benefits for the field.

KEY WORDS Bologna ♦ UK and Europe ♦ UK women's and gender studies

The European University Association held its convention at Strathclyde University, Glasgow, 31 March–2 April 2005 (Froment, 2005), and the UK took over the presidency of the EU on 1 July 2005, with an agenda to focus on ICT, higher education, schools and skills (Europe Unit, 2005a). All this would seem to bode well for the UK's move towards implementing the Bologna Declaration by 2012. For those not obsessed with this process, the Bologna Declaration (1999) aims to harmonize divergent EU higher education systems, creating Europe-wide cooperation and competition. It heralds the introduction of a 3 + 1/2 system – three-year BA courses followed by one- or two-year masters programmes (Barazzetti and Leone, 2003: 17–18) – with a streamlining of provision marked by universal systems of accreditation (ECTs) and the development of universal subject benchmarks.

Yet despite the apparent centrality of the UK to implementation of the Bologna Declaration by 2012, progress reports indicate that we are lagging behind in many respects. The 2003 Higher Education White Paper, for

example, which set out the future agenda for the UK higher education sector, failed even to mention Bologna (Euro RSCG Riley, 2003), and while vice chancellors and education ministers are no doubt aware of the issues facing the UK, many of the rank and file of UK universities (staff and students alike) have never heard of Bologna, except by gastronomic reputation. This is because, at a superficial level at least, the UK system of higher education appears to meet many of the requirements of the Declaration, particularly those stressing a two-tier system, quality assurance, attention to diversity and employability and comparability. But in terms of the detail, it is clear that the UK is resting on its laurels, and is likely to fall behind with respect to development of a European curriculum, transferable credit systems and real mobility of staff and students within the EU.

This article provides a brief, general account of the UK's position with respect to implementation of the major areas of concern set out in the Declaration, and locates women's and gender studies in relationship to these. I am interested in evaluating the significance of implementation of the Bologna Declaration for women's and gender studies in the UK, particularly in light of the current lack of national support for this academic field. Might Bologna offer a way forward for academic feminist work in a context of lack of recognition of subject area by the HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) and other funding bodies at the national level? Might researchers and teachers in this field want to take seriously the shifts in practice and focus Bologna suggests, even if the rest of UK higher education is slow to do so?

THE TWO-CYCLE SYSTEM

The main priority under Bologna is the establishment of a pan-European degree structure allowing for easy translation of higher education degrees across nation-states. At present, degree structures differ radically, and the adoption of a two-cycle bachelor's and master's system is intended to facilitate movement of people and recognition of qualifications internationally. Despite much rumour to the contrary, the Bologna Declaration does not specify the length of the master's degree in the two-tier system. Most UK institutions already have a two- or three-tier system of a three-year bachelor's, one-year master's and three-year PhD. The funding councils confirm this model, providing competitive 1 + 3 funding for post-graduates (one-year master's + three years' PhD funding), so this is fully institutionalized. An additional year's writing-up time (usually unfunded) is common for PhDs, but any delay in submission within the required period already results in punitive measures against the particular department, suggesting the policing of this process is also well established.

Europe-wide streamlining of the degree structure will help to facilitate

movement to and from UK institutions, although it should be noted that there are institutional differences in entry-level expectations, and in degree requirements for postgraduate study, within the UK, though some flexibility for entry requirements is maintained to ensure parity of access, particularly for mature students. The primary barrier to movement is probably the increasingly small number of part-time degrees on offer in the UK system, suggesting a rather nominal focus on access currently. In addition, while the one-year master's degree does not present a barrier to comparability as such, anxiety remains about whether it is possible or desirable to pack enough ECTS into a single-year master's to allow for that comparability in real terms. In this respect, we may well want to encourage the development of more two-year master's programmes in the UK in future, in order to prevent overloading of credits (and teaching commitments) into a single year. This would be a particularly important concern for small departments, where any increase in courses is likely to translate into higher teaching loads for already overburdened staff.

Within women's and gender studies, the UK is currently in a period of transition. While the field continues to attract large numbers of graduate students (mostly overseas students), particularly in the context of joint degrees with development, social policy or media, and an interested student can take pathways or individual courses in feminist issues and perspectives in almost any university in the country, undergraduate programmes have been decimated, with all UK single honours programmes having closed at the time of writing, and increasing numbers of autonomous centres, departments or institutes having to move into larger departments to survive in any form (Hemmings, 2006). It is still possible to follow pathways in women's or gender studies, or a myriad of courses in disciplinary and interdisciplinary feminist approaches, at undergraduate level, but the primary area of growth currently is at postgraduate levels. At master's level, the range of courses and degree-awarding sites is staggering, with 29 institutions offering one or more degrees in women's studies (or variant), and many more offering individual courses.¹

If women's and gender studies is to survive at taught postgraduate level in the UK, the following two issues seem to be particularly key in the context of Bologna's two-tier system. First, the maintenance of independent, interdisciplinary centres and departments in women's and gender studies, as well as the integration of teaching and research within disciplinary contexts, is critical. This is not only because of the intellectual importance of maintaining academic feminism as a field in its own right, but also to preserve the marketability of UK programmes. It is now overwhelmingly overseas (within and outside the EU) students who come to the UK to participate in women's and gender studies graduate programmes, for the simple reason that interdisciplinary centres of this kind are rare elsewhere. This is true even for students from countries with

high levels of institutionalization of academic feminism in their own right. Thus US students are drawn to UK programmes because of their interdisciplinary status (as well as content), because this form of institutionalization of women's and gender studies as a discipline that is in its infancy in the US; and in Germany, while there are high numbers of interdisciplinary centres for women's and gender studies, these tend to have a research rather than pedagogic focus. The Bologna process seems likely to further encourage this independence if degrees can be made comparable through the adoption of the European credit system, and if students taking a full master's can use this as the basis for entry to a PhD programme in another context.

The second area critical to the continued health of UK women's and gender studies is the development, within both autonomous and integrated women's and gender studies contexts, of joint degrees with a disciplinary or vocational focus (e.g. gender and social policy; women and law). This is in line with the Bologna Declaration's focus on employability and international competitiveness; and funds to support vocational developments in particular are more likely to be forthcoming at the European than the national level. It also seems likely that perspectives that explicitly address European dimensions on, for example, women and law degrees will be more sustainable in this respect (as well as more attractive to the mobile European student body envisaged under Bologna). Our sense of what international curriculum development means might thus need to shift to reflecting on and interrogating European perspectives more consistently than is currently the norm.

At PhD level, women's studies provision is also very healthy, with PhD student numbers at established institutions such as York, Lancaster and the LSE often in the twenties. PhD training is often partially integrated with master's programmes, which provides useful mixing across the levels, and pre-Bologna, these PhDs were attractive to overseas students because of the relatively short length of the doctorate offered in the UK, and the ability to obtain a PhD in women's or gender studies *tout court*. In this context, it is possible that the implementation of the Bologna Declaration across Europe will result in a decrease in take-up of PhD places from European students, who will be offered greater choice in their home countries. That said, unlike many other European contexts, PhD supervision does not need to be professorial in the UK, so the options for, e.g. Italian students, to pursue doctorates at home may well remain limited. In terms of the Bologna Declaration's emphasis on employability, it is worth noting that PhDs in women's and gender studies do not appear to be disadvantaged on the academic job market. While the vast majority of PhDs in women's or gender studies do not get jobs in this field directly, movement into other interdisciplinary areas (e.g. media studies, cultural studies, area studies and so on) is common, as is movement into a more

traditional discipline (sociology, English, politics). My suspicion is that this is partly to do with the high levels of productivity that location in a politicized field tends to result in, and the early development of skills in self-marketing in relation to scarce funding, for example.

CREDIT AND MOBILITY

While the UK recognizes the relative value of bachelors degrees across Europe in making its decisions about postgraduate entry, a credit system for module recognition is currently only institutionalized in Scotland and Wales (*The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 2005). In England, a national system for academic credits is being considered, and is likely to be facilitated by the increasing implementation of 'learning outcomes' as part of student syllabi, but otherwise, introduction of transferable credits has only occurred in one or two English universities (e.g. University of Newcastle). Where universities are signed up to the Erasmus or Socrates exchange schemes, students can gain credit for individual courses in European universities, but take-up for this is low compared to other European universities (Europe Unit, 2005b).² There are several reasons for this. The UK as a whole is slow to adopt credit or exchange systems in part because their bachelors programmes still tend to be progressive rather than modular – a year at a participating Paris university might currently mean having to sit the substantive units allowing progression at the home UK university upon return. The paucity of language skills students develop pre-higher education in the UK also means that students are either limited to those courses taught in English, or, if advanced second language skills are present, to the country/ies teaching in that language.

My suspicion is that these difficulties would be surmountable in many respects, were it not for many UK universities' continued belief in the superiority of its degrees, and the unfounded perception of potential lowering of standards and quality assurance. Where the will to integrate credits from other European countries exists – and the relatively high take-up of Erasmus places elsewhere by British students on UK women's and gender studies programmes, particularly at graduate level, is a good example of such an institutionalized will – this has been easily achieved. Indeed, the introduction and normalization of a nationwide European credit transfer system would greatly benefit UK women's and gender studies students, particularly those housed in single disciplines taking women's and gender studies courses or pathways. And while women's and gender studies masters programmes are currently filled predominantly with overseas (non-EU) fee-paying students, who are less likely to want to learn a new institutional context during their 'year abroad', the adoption of a transferable credit system is unlikely to have any impact on these students' take-up of UK places.

In many ways, international mobility is already central to the development of women's and gender studies postgraduate provision in the UK, with joint degrees in gender/women and development, policy or media, encouraging graduates to use the qualifications as a stepping-stone to international advocacy or INGO work, for example (Griffin and Hanmer, 2001; Silius, 2002).³ A creative rather than passive adoption of the credit transfer system could be used to create links with other European programmes that would be a positive draw to such students, particularly if developed in line with the employment-oriented masters programmes. While the implementation of credit transfer systems with a view to increased mobility of students (and staff) seems as though it could only benefit the health of women's and gender studies in the UK, this needs to be critically situated as well. With high fees for many courses, and the high cost of living in the UK (particularly in London), only the fortunate or the privileged currently have access to UK masters degrees from elsewhere. In this context, implementation of the Bologna Declaration needs to attend to ways of ensuring that this mobility is resolutely 'open-access', rather than the privileging of elites in the name of increased diversity, as it often is currently, as well as encouraging UK students and staff not to think of ourselves as landlocked.

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND THE NECESSARY 'EUROPEAN DIMENSION'

As suggested earlier, the UK already has a national, government-run system of quality assurance in teaching and learning, and women's and gender studies benchmarks have been established and circulated within the subject area (but not yet validated by HEFCE). In the UK, recognition and funding for research and teaching are largely dependent on the national funding councils, such as the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). Currently, and as already indicated, feminist research is not recognized as a separate field of enquiry, so that students and staff applying for grants have to apply under a different subject area. This means that their work is rarely assessed by experts in the field, which severely disadvantages feminist proposals.⁴ In addition, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) that dominates contemporary British academic life has dispensed with the women's studies sub-panel for the 2008 round, relying instead on a *de facto* 'sub sub-panel' within the sociology sub-panel to evaluate feminist research output.⁵ While feminist research in other areas can be cross-referred to the sociology panel, many researchers will either not know this, or will not want to mark themselves out as separate within their departmental submission without a higher profile given to feminist research in its own right.

While not supported at the national level, there is nevertheless considerable interinstitutional cooperation within women's and gender studies in the UK, through the national association – the Feminist and Women's Studies Association (FWSA) (UK and Ireland) – with its associated newsletter, and annual conference. This provides an opportunity for sharing of expertise (for professional purposes such as article reviewing and external examining), promotion of individuals (for the purposes of national and local committee membership and so on) and curriculum development. These networks also operate to produce quality control of research and teaching since both are subject to external peer assessment and review. Again, the ability to call on experts for this is critical to maintaining a consistently high standard in pedagogy and publication. What the lack of national support means, however, is that the same small pool of dedicated feminist academics are called on to do this work without it translating into the 'esteem indicators' of other more recognized disciplines. Thus, women's and gender studies experts serve on journal and representative boards that may not benefit them in promotional terms, while other disciplinary experts are called on in directly recognizable ways. It is at the level of quality assurance and recognition, in particular, then, that UK women's and gender studies stands to gain the most from serious consideration of the Bologna Declaration, since this offers hope of European validation of the quality of feminist teaching and research that the UK is currently unlikely to offer.

Women's and gender studies has done much to address questions of intersectionality in its curriculum development and pedagogy, but this is patchy and subject to institutional and individual/departmental variation. The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 gives UK higher education institutions a statutory duty to promote race equality, and universities thus have an obligation to monitor curriculum, teaching and learning, assessment and student support for their attention to race, racism and culture, and women's and gender studies is ahead of other disciplines in the UK in many respects. But while attention to race and ethnicity nationally and internationally is understood as a necessity in the majority of women's and gender studies contexts, exactly what full consideration of a 'European dimension' might involve remains rather obscure, as indicated earlier. Despite the efforts of organizations like Athena (the thematic network in European women's studies) to promote a European perspective within women's studies, UK feminist academics are still loath to think through what 'European' might mean in a systematic way, particularly with respect to questions of migration, forced exile and citizenship.⁶ Yet despite this clear need for more 'European content' in UK women's and gender studies curricula, I believe we must exercise caution when equating 'European perspectives' with 'European content' in a way that reinforces fantasies of the integrity and 'difference' of nation

states; such perspectives preserve rather than challenge privileged white European-ness, and obscure the central role of migration and displacement in the make-up of contemporary Europe (Griffin and Braidotti, 2002; Vasterline et al., 2006).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While not underestimating the competition-led nature of the Bologna Declaration, which should be critically examined as well as positively adopted, UK women's and gender studies needs to foreground implementation of the Bologna Declaration in order to sustain its own growth, as well as in order to promote good practice. What UK women's and gender studies stands to gain from taking a lead in contrast to UK higher education's more general reluctance to move forward with Bologna, includes, but is not restricted to, the following:

- Participation in exchange networks for staff and students at a more widespread level both to bolster their own student numbers, and to promote an international perspective based on access rather than privilege.
- Ongoing curriculum and departmental development addressing difference, diversity and intersectionality at the European as well as UK and other international levels.
- European recognition of women's and gender studies as a distinct research and teaching category to facilitate national as well as international recognition of the same.

NOTES

1. The source is from the Feminist and Women's Studies Association (FWSA) (UK and Ireland) course listings in women's and gender studies, and is subject to alteration.
2. The exception to this pattern is of course language degrees, but the year abroad is already factored into progression in this case.
3. In this sense, women's and gender studies in the UK does meet the further recommendation (August 2002) that implementation of the Bologna Declaration attend to 'co-operation with third-world countries' (Euro RSCG Riley, 2003).
4. Griffin and Hanmer (2001) argue that women's and gender studies should have focused its efforts much more firmly on establishing its (disciplinary) status as a subject field in the early years of academic institutionalization in the UK.
5. The RAE is the national evaluation of academic research output (articles and books) that determines the research money allocated to each university department.

6. At a seminar on European Gender Chronologies held in Utrecht in April 2005 the discussion between Dutch and UK feminist academics continued to make primary reference, albeit critical, to Anglo-US texts, for example.

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Clare Hemmings is senior lecturer in gender studies at the LSE. She teaches within interdisciplinary feminist and sexuality studies. Her forthcoming book critiques dominant progress narratives within western feminist theory, and argues for a more nuanced engagement with the recent feminist past. She is currently co-chair of the Feminist and Women's Studies Association (FWSA) (UK and Ireland), the coordinator of 'Travelling Concepts in Feminist Pedagogy', an Athena European Women's Studies project, and a member of the editorial collective for Feminist Review. Address: Gender Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK. [email: c.hemmings@lse.ac.uk]